The Sweating System

Excerpted from Florence Kelley, The sweating system of Chicago. In: Bureau of Statistics of Labor of Illinois. Seventh Biennial Report, 1892. Springfield, Ill: HK Rokker; 1893:357, 360–362, 364–365, 378–379, 396.

Florence Kelley, campaigner against sweatshop labor (courtesy of the Center for the Historical Study of Women and Gender, State University of New York at Binghamton).

ANY INQUIRY INTO THE occupations of working women in Chicago, or in any other of the larger cities, must lead the inquirer, sooner or later, to the so-called "sweating system," under which the manufacture of ready-made clothing is chiefly conducted. The peculiarities of this phase of industrial life are, however, so marked, and have recently attracted so much attention, that it has been deemed proper to extend the observations of the bureau in this matter beyond the women employed under this system, and to gather whatever facts or figures were available concerning all the shops of this kind, and all the people, both men and women, employed in them, in Chicago. This has involved the collection of some memoranda as to the distinctive features of the system, as well as the statistics of its present development in this State. . . .

IN CHICAGO

In Chicago, where it dates back scarcely a generation, the sweating system seems to be a direct outgrowth of the factory system; that is, the sweat-shops have gradually superseded the manufacturers' shops. It increases with the demand for cheap clothing, the influx of cheap labor, and the consequent subdivision of the processes of manufacture. In the clothing trades in Chicago, three different sorts of shops have been developed, known among the employees as the "inside shops," or those conducted on the factory system by the manufacturers themselves; the "outside shops," or those conducted by the contractors; and the "home shops" or family groups.

INSIDE, OR MANUFACTURERS' SHOPS

In the inside shops the manufacturer deals with his employees through foremen and forewomen instead of contractors. These

shops are in large buildings, steam is provided for motive power, the sanitary ordinances are, in a measure, observed, and the establishments, being large and permanent, are known to the municipal authorities and are subject to inspection. Even these shops, in which there is, strictly, no sub-letting, are pervaded and dominated by the influence of the sweating system. There is but little uniformity of hours, wages, rules, length of season or proportion of men to women and children. The competition of the outside contractors renders the position of employees constantly more precarious, and the inside shops which thrive are those [that] approximate most closely to the organization of the sweaters' shops, substituting many subdivisions of labor for the skilled workman.

Formerly these shops employed cutters, button-holers, and tailors or cloakmakers who did the whole work, taking the garment from the cutter and completing it, doing both machine and hand work. To increase their speed these skilled hands now have "hand-girls" who do the simple sewing, put on buttons, draw basting threads, etc. Formerly the skilled tailors or cloakmakers constituted a large majority of the employees, but with the growth of

Florence Kelley:
A Factory Inspector Campaigns Against Sweatshop Labor

FLORENCE KELLEY WAS perhaps the most famous and effective of the labor commissioners, appointed in Progressive Era America, to inspect factory working conditions and determine their level of compliance with the new protective labor legislation passed in the early 20th century.[1] Kelley began life as a feminist and social democrat. She studied at the University of Zurich, at that time the only European university to grant degrees to women; married a Russian Jewish socialist medical student; joined the German Social Democratic Party; and translated into English Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England.*[2–4]

Back in America, she left her by now abusive husband, moved to Chicago, lived in Jane Addams' Hull House, completed a law degree, and became a leader of the fight against unsafe labor conditions. She visited roughly a thousand "sweaters' victims" in the garment industry, recording their conditions both at work and at home. Hearing of her reputation, Carroll Wright, head of the US Department of Labor, hired her to direct a cadre of workers to collect data on every house, tenement, and room in the Nineteenth Ward of Chicago.

Kelley often spoke at protest meetings against sweatshop conditions. In 1892 she wrote a sweeping report on the sweatshop problem, from which this selection is a brief extract. (Extracts from the entire report can be accessed at http://womhist.binghamton.edu/factory/doclist.htm.) Her recommendations were adopted by the Illinois legislature, which in 1893 passed a law limiting women and children's working hours to 8 per day, prohibiting sweatshops, and creating a factory inspector's office with a staff of 12, half of whom had to be women. Kelley was immediately appointed chief factory inspector, and she summarized her highly effective reform strategy in 4 words: "investigate, educate, legislate, enforce."[5]

Although the Illinois Manufacturers Association fought Kelley and won a Supreme Court battle declaring the limitation of women's wage labor to 8 hours per day to be unconstitutional, and although Kelley lost her job as chief factory inspector, she was undeterred. She agreed to serve as secretary of the newly formed National Consumers League (NCL) and transformed that organization into the nation's leading exponent of protective labor legislation for women and children. Kelley built 64 local consumer leagues across the country to help promote and pass labor legislation. In 1908, a case between the Oregon NCL and a local laundry owner was argued by Louis D. Brandeis; the court upheld as constitutional an Oregon law limiting women's wage labor to 10 hours a day. Other states would soon agree to limit the hours of labor for women and children and, ultimately, for all workers. ■

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the sweating system the cutters alone increase in number and their speed is multiplied by the use of steam machinery. All goods not needed to fill urgent orders are now given direct from the cutters to the sweaters' shops. Some manufacturers have modified their own shops to mere cutters' shops and send all their garments to the contractors; others have found it unprofitable to manufacture for themselves and have resorted to the sweaters entirely. Thus the sweating system strengthens itself and eliminates the clothing factory proper. Very few of these remain, and those which were found are not enumerated as sweating shops.

OUTSIDE, OR CONTRACTORS' SHOPS

Substantially all manufacturers employ a number of sweaters who conduct small shops on their own account. These underbid each other to obtain work. They do not make common cause against the manufacturers, either by combining among themselves or by uniting with their employees. On the contrary, they exploit their employees to the utmost to compensate themselves for the exactions of the manufacturers and the competition among themselves. . . .

In the small shops the characteristics of the sweating system are accentuated, and the most marked of these are disorder and instability. The latter results from the irresponsibility of the sweater and the facility with which he may either establish himself or change his location. This has very much embarrassed the process of enumeration. A man may work in his bedroom to-day, in another man's shop to-morrow, in his own shop in a month, and before the end of the season abandon that for a place in a factory. If an inspector orders sanitary changes to be made within a week, the sweater may prefer to disappear before the close of the week and open another shop in another place. Such easy evasion of the authorities places the sweater almost beyond official control, and many of them overcrowd their shops, overwork their employees, hire small children, keep their shops unclean, and their sanitary arrangements foul and inadequate. . . .

A few examples may be cited illustrating what some of these places are like: In one case several men were found at work pressing knee-pants in a low basement room poorly lighted and ventilated by two small windows. There was no floor in this room, and the people were living on the bare earth, which was damp and littered with every sort of rubbish. In another case seven persons were at work in a room 12 by 15 feet in dimensions and with but two windows. These people, with the sewing machines of operators and the tables used by the pressers, so filled this meager space that it was impossible to move about. Charcoal was used for heating the pressers' irons, and the air was offensive and prostrating to a degree. . . .

One of the principal aims of the sweater is the avoidance of rent. Hence the only requirement for a sweaters' shop is that the structure must be strong enough to sustain the jar of the machines. This condition being filled, any tenement-room is available, whether in loft, or basement, or stable. Fire-escapes in such buildings are unknown; water for flushing closets is rarely found, and the employees are equally at the mercy of fire and disease. Frequently the sweater's home is his shop, with a bed among the machines; or, the family sleeps on cots, which are removed during the day to make room for employees. Sometimes two or three employees are also boarders or lodgers, and the tenement dwelling is the shop; and cooking, sleeping, sewing and the nursing of the sick are going on simultaneously.

A shop was found in which 12 persons lived in 6 rooms, of which two were used as a shop. Knee-pants in all stages of completion filled the shop, the bedrooms and kitchen. Nine men were employed at machines in a room 12 by 14, and there knee-pants were being manufactured by the thousand gross. This is in the rear of a swarming tenement in a wretched street. Sometimes the landlord is the sweater, using his own basement or outhouse for a shop and renting his rooms to his employees for dwellings. Only one case was found in which a tailor, not a sweater, had acquired a house. He is a skilled tailor, still doing "the whole work" at home, assisted by his wife. For nineteen years he has lived and worked in two wretched rear tenement rooms, paying by installments for his house, which is still encumbered. All others in the trade who owned houses were found to be either sweaters or women finishers, whose able-bodied husbands follow other occupations, such as teaming, peddling, ditching, street cleaning, etc.

But the worst conditions of all prevail among the families who finish garments at home. Here the greatest squalor and filth abounds and the garments are of necessity exposed to it . . . during the process of finishing. A single room frequently serves as

kitchen, bed-room, living-room and working-room. In the Italian quarter four families were found occupying one four-room flat, using one cook stove, and all the women and children sewing in the bed-rooms. For this flat they pay $10 a month, each family contributing $2.50 a month. Another group was found consisting of 13 persons, of whom 4 were fathers of families, and 5 were women and girls sewing on cloaks at home. These 13 people pay $8 per month rent, each family contributing $2. . . .

DISEASE AND INFECTION

It is needless to suggest that the sweat-shop districts as they have been described are the natural abodes of disease and the breeding places of infection and epidemics. While the system does not create these conditions, it penetrates the regions where they exist and thrives upon an atmosphere which a higher form of industry could not breathe. It is true the normal or ordinary death rate in the wards mentioned is not conspicuously greater than in others; possibly the vital statistics of certain localities within wards might show the actual and relative effects of bad sanitation more forcibly; at least, disease and all death laden agencies pervade these communities, and if they have escaped pestilence in the past, they still may be ripening for plague in the future.

Observation among sweated people confirms the opinion that a direct consequence of their occupation is a general impairment of health in both sexes; in men the debility takes the form of consumption, either of the lungs or intestines, and of complete exhaustion and premature old age; the girls become victims of consumption, dyspepsia, and lifelong pelvic disorders. These are the results of the overexertion, bad housing, undernourishment and noxious surroundings common to their calling and condition in life. But in addition to these disabilities they are constantly exposed to the inroads of typhoid and scarlet fevers, and other zymotic diseases. Cases of this kind develop in the tenements and too often have but scant medical or other attendance. At the same time and in the same apartments quantities of cloaks, clothing, or children's garments may be present in various stages of finishing. It is hardly necessary to establish the fact that children's clothing is sometimes thus exposed and thus infected with the most fatal maladies of childhood, for it is apparent that under the given conditions entire immunity from infection could not be possible; yet the following instances of disease in the presence or proximity of garment-making, are cited as those which came under the observation of the bureau:

> A grandmother was found dying of cancer without medical attendance in the same room with a man and his wife and three children. The man and wife were at work finishing men's coats, many of which were lying about the room.
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> In a tenement house a man was found just recovering from malignant diphtheria, while in the room adjoining, on the same floor, and in the room above, knee-pants were being finished, and the work had not been suspended during any stage of the disease.

In the busy season women and girls drive their machines at the greatest possible speed for ten hours a day, under the stimulus of plenty of work and good earnings while it lasts, but it often breaks them down and sends them to the hospital before the season is over. Even men fail rapidly under this strain and are prematurely superannuated. A man who has run a machine from his 12th to his 36th year, under the conditions prevailing in this trade, aggravated by bad housing, bad food, over-exertion during the summer and anxiety during the winter, is now practically an old man. In the shop where he has worked for seven years it no longer pays the sweater to give him room, because his speed and endurance are no longer up to the standard. It is said that there are no men of 45 in the sweaters' shops, not because they have risen out of them, but because they have broken down by reason of them. ■